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INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000481

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2018
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SUBJECT: WHY ARE THERE SO FEW IRANIANS IN IZMIR?

REF: A) ISTANBUL 416 B) ISTANBUL 145
C) 2007 ATHENS 2204

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk;
Reason 1.5 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Local police officials, human rights experts, and Izmir-based diplomats and consular agents told us that Izmir does not host a large or active Iranian community. A police official estimated the number of legal Iranian residents as "fewer than 1,000," while a human rights expert told us that most Iranian refugees end up in Istanbul, Kayseri, or Van. Some 43 companies "with Iranian capital" are registered in Izmir, but they are small, privately-owned, and focused on import/export of household goods. We were surprised to find little evidence of an active or significant Iranian expatriate community in Izmir, a city of 2.6 million, but we find credible our interlocutors' explanations: that a mass arrest of Iranian migrants in Izmir in May 2000; as well as a GOT decision to send most registered Iranian refugees to Kayseri and Van; and efforts by Izmir's municipal and police authorities to keep the Iranian presence small, ensure that most Iranians who come to Turkey stay away from Izmir. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Consulate General Istanbul's "Iran Watcher" traveled to Izmir, Turkey's third largest city, on August 28-29, 2008, to investigate whether Izmir hosts a significant Iranian expatriate community. We spoke to local police officials, human rights lawyers specializing in refugee assistance, foreign diplomats and honorary consuls assigned to Izmir, the local Chamber of Commerce, and a member of an Iranian Ministry of Culture delegation hosting a cultural booth at Izmir's International Trade Fair.

Views from Izmir's Police Department

¶3. (SBU) Izmir Deputy Police Chief for Foreigners Muzaffer Adem, his chief of staff Kadir Kani, and visiting Ankara Police Chief for Foreigners Kadir Ay, met with Istanbul Pol-Econ officer and Izmir-based consular agent on August 28. Adem explained that Izmir's police department did not maintain specific records by nationality of foreign citizens resident in the city. He reviewed Izmir's long history as a city open to foreigners and described Izmir today as "Turkey's most tolerant and open-minded city." Adem acknowledged that Izmir police and municipal authorities do contend at times with influxes of refugees from Africa, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka but he insisted that Izmir has no significant Iranian refugee community, and estimated that there were "fewer than 1,000" legal Iranian residents in Izmir, "who keep to themselves and stay out of trouble."

¶4. (SBU) Adem's deputy, Kani, underscored that Turkey has a well-established system of assigning refugees to temporarily

resettlement camps in "satellite cities" (ref A). Under this system, the GOT rarely sends Iranians to Izmir, instead sending them primarily to Kayseri (ref B) and Van. Moreover, he explained that Iranians who are not refugees and who wish to live in Izmir for more than three months require a residency permit issued by the police department. "We issue very few of those" Kani said. (Comment: This admission from Kani seems to undercut his boss's assertion that Izmir police authorities do not maintain nationality-specific records of Izmir's residents. End comment.) Adem and Kani acknowledged that Izmir's airport offered direct flights to and from Tehran, and that as a result Izmir received "several thousand" Iranian tourists every year, but they dismissed those numbers as being unrelated to the question of any Iranian expatriate community in Izmir, as "most of those tourists are only coming through Izmir on their way to the Aegean beaches."

15. (SBU) Despite occasional Turkish press reports suggesting that Izmir is a point of departure for human smuggling routes that smuggle Afghans and others through Iran, all three police officials vehemently denied that Izmir faced any serious problem with smuggling or with human or drug trafficking, especially any involving Iranian traffickers. Adem and Kani acknowledged the growing presence of Russian and Moldovan trafficking gangs in the area, but said Izmir was not a major transit route for smuggling or trafficking. "Most of the smuggling and trafficking goes through Istanbul, Trabzon, or Antalya" Adem explained. (Comment: Adem neglected to mention a tragic incident in December 2007, when a boat capsized south of Izmir, drowning 30 illegal migrants attempting to cross from Izmir to nearby Greek Aegean

ISTANBUL 00000481 002 OF 003

islands. End comment.)

16. (SBU) Asked why a city of over 2.6 million inhabitants would host so few Iranian residents, Adem recalled an incident in May 2000, when Turkish authorities rounded up and arrested over 400 Iranian "illegal workers" in Izmir (as well as in Istanbul and Ankara), deporting some of them back to Iran and resettling others to Van and Kayseri. "Since then, we just don't see many Iranians here in Izmir."

Izmir's Diplomats: This city is too secular for Iranians

17. (SBU) At an August 28 farewell luncheon for Germany's Consul in Izmir, we spoke to the Greek Consul General, the Malaysian Honorary Consul General, the Indonesian Honorary Consul General, and the Belgian Honorary Consul General (comment: the Honorary CGs were Turkish nationals). None were aware of any significant, politically active Iranian community in Izmir. All agreed that Izmir certainly hosted small numbers of legal Iranian residents, as well as an Iranian bank, Bank Mellat, which has a branch office on Cumhuriyet Caddesi in downtown Izmir. The Greek CG speculated that Izmir's local authorities likely acted to keep the numbers of Iranian legal residents in Izmir "down to a small number," and added that Izmir's reputation as Turkey's most secular, Kemalist city, and its distance from the Iranian border, probably limited the appeal of Izmir as a place where an Iranian diaspora would want to settle.

Human Rights Experts Concur

18. (SBU) We met August 28 with Selvin Cetin and Orcun Ulusoy, of Izmir's "Human Rights Agenda Association" (HRAA). Established in 2003, HRAA's main focus is offering legal and human rights training to local officials, teachers, educators, and other NGOs within Turkey, to help Turkish institutions implement the EU's human rights convention in order to better prepare Turkey eventually to meet EU human rights standards. Cetin explained that his organization focuses its efforts on Turkey's eastern Mediterranean region,

including the Aegean and Black Sea areas of Turkey. One critical aspect of HRAA's mission, Cetin noted, was to ensure that local authorities in Izmir and elsewhere offer humanitarian support to refugees, migrants, and other displaced persons. He estimated that up to 300 refugees and migrants transit through Izmir every day, only a small portion of whom seek assistance from HRAA. Cetin and Ulusoy agreed that Izmir hosts a relatively small number of Iranian refugees, particularly compared to the numbers of Afghan, Pakistani, Somali, and African refugees in the city. "Most Iranian refugees who register with UNHCR are sent to Kayseri or Van. Most unregistered Iranian refugees make their way to Istanbul." Cetin said he was aware of a handful of Iranian "Christian converts" living in Izmir, but added that that sub-group in particular kept to itself and had no contact with other Iranians.

¶9. (SBU) Cetin reinforced what Izmiri police officials had told us: that based on his own observations of the foreign refugee community, non-Turkish criminal gangs had not yet established a smuggling-related operational presence in Izmir, but he believed it was just a matter of time before the "drug and human trafficking -- refugee nexus" becomes a bigger problem in Izmir, especially as Turkey slowly progresses towards EU association and membership, raising the appeal of transit through Turkey to the EU before Turkey's own borders are tightened to meet EU standards.

¶10. (SBU) Cetin also agreed that the Iranian refugee presence in Izmir reached a likely peak in 1998-2000, before the mass arrests of Iranians in Izmir in May 2000 reduced that presence. Cetin explained that many of the Iranians arrested eight years ago had been "politically active oppositionists, including with the Mujahedin (MKO)." Those arrests, he assessed, sent a signal to Iranians that they would not be welcome in Izmir.

Iranian Commercial and Cultural Presence

¶11. (SBU) According to information provided to us by the Izmir Chamber of Commerce, 43 companies "with Iranian capital" are registered in Izmir (list emailed to NEA/IR), though almost all of them are small, privately-owned companies; none of them are listed on Turkey's stock exchange. According to Izmir's Chamber of Commerce, those companies are primarily involved in the import/export of

ISTANBUL 00000481 003 OF 003

textiles, leather goods, automobiles, furniture, home appliances, and medical supplies, as well as tourism.

¶12. (SBU) Our visit to Izmir coincided with Izmir's annual International Fair, which included a booth sponsored by Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The booth offered several books about Iran's cultural heritage (focusing on Persepolis, Esfahan, and Shiraz), and framed reproductions of famous Iranian calligraphy, paintings, and Archaemenid icons. Pol-econ officer asked the lone Iranian official manning the booth whether many local Iranian residents had stopped by to see the Ministry of Culture's offerings, and was told by the surprised official that "only Turks" had visited the booth.

Comment

¶13. (C) We were surprised to find little evidence of an active or significant Iranian expatriate community in such a large Turkish city. Historically Izmir once served as a destination point for Iranians, not least as the final point on the "King's Road" built by the Emperor Darius to link ancient Persia's Mesopotamian provinces to the Aegean coast, and more recently as brief residence-in-exile for Ayatollah Khomeini in 1964 before he moved to Najaf, Iraq. However, given the consensus views we heard from Izmiri police,

diplomats, and human rights interlocutors, we judge their conclusions as credible: That the mass arrests in May, 2000 sent a signal to the Iranian community that Izmir was far less welcoming a city to Iranians than Istanbul was and is; that most registered Iranian refugees are sent instead to Kayseri and Van; and that Izmir's strongly secularist municipal and police authorities want to keep it that way. We will, however, continue to monitor the status of Iranians in Izmir, to watch for any signs of a growing Iranian expatriate presence there as economic and political conditions in Iran remain in flux. End comment.

WIENER